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The Emergence of Metaethical Reasoning

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Abstract

The paper describes a multidimensional model of the growth of moral reasoning that is significantly different from those proposed by Kohlberg and Piaget. A study that tests several aspects of the model on university students is reported. The suggestion that well-developed chains of reasons are a prerequisite for the emergence of metaethical reasoning was supported. The suggestion that reflective reasoning is a prerequisite for the emergence of metaethical reasoning was not supported, but this may have been due to difficulties with the elicitation technique employed. The role of metaethical reasoning within different kinds of world-view was explored using case studies. Some suggestions are made regarding the role of metaethical stances in producing a reorganisation in the content of values. It is suggested that adults need to take more responsibility for the induction of younger children into particular ethical codes than implied by the theories of Kohlberg and Piaget, but that comparative and reflective treatment of ethical systems is more suitable for senior high school and tertiary students.

Keywords:

Moral development, ethical education, moral values, value judgment, cognitive development, religious education

The Emergence of Metaethical Reasoning

This article is chiefly concerned with descriptive analysis of the preparation for and emergence of metaethical reasoning among university undergraduates. The implications of the suggested analysis for moral education in schools and tertiary institutions will also be discussed.

Metaethical reasoning involves second-order reflection upon the sources and methodological justifications for ethical principles and values. All available analyses of such reasoning suggest that it occurs in only a minority of individuals in late adolescence and early adulthood. The way in which such changes are viewed by theorists depends partly on how the earlier development of moral reasoning is construed and partly on how metaethical reasoning itself is construed. The theoretical analysis of both these aspects of moral development adopted here is largely that presented by Trainer (1977, 1982) and Langford and D'Cruz (in press). This will be contrasted with the views of Colby and Kohlberg (1987) and Gibbs (1979).

Trainer (1982) suggests there are three successive phases in the achievement of high-level moral reasoning, as follows: 'Individuals differ greatly in the degree of reasoning and systematisation their moral thinking exhibits and it has seemed that much of this variation can profitably be described in terms of a sequence of categories ranging from the level of reason-less 'isolated intuitive certainties', through a wide stage in which there is increasing clarification and articulation of substantive values and culminating in a stage where the moral world view has been integrated with an explicit metaethical position.' (pp. 177-8) It is important to realise that Trainer is not saying that those

in the first of these phases are not able to give any reasons for their moral judgements or for the moral rules to which they give assent. He is rather arguing that children and adolescents internalise moral rules, sources of information to use in making moral decisions and justifications for rules and judgements/decisions from the society around them without much deliberate reflection upon or review of either the content of moral rules or the kinds of justification conventionally provided for them. In offering a moral justification such children and adolescents search in a kit or tool box of possible reasons, such as 'consequences for himself, consequences for others, what other people expect, what the law says, what his conscience says, what his principles say, what rights people have, etc.' (p.197). The probability that a given tool of justification will be selected is strongly influenced by the situation about which a judgement has been made (a claim confirmed by Langford and D'Cruz (in press)).

The process by which 'there is increasing clarification and articulation of substantive values' can be illustrated by two of its most common exemplars: the development of utilitarianism and of religious morality (the term utilitarianism is explained below). As individuals reflect, in a gradual and rather unsystematic way, about the particular rules they have come to give assent to, aided by discussion with other people and no doubt also by reading, they are able to work back in a more fluent and organised manner from particular judgements, through rules applying to particular situations, to increasingly general rules governing their system of moral thinking. In the case of utilitarianism the most general rule of all is 'act to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number' (or some variant); in the

case of Christian ethics it is 'act in accordance with the will of God' (or some variant). The successively elicited rules that result from working up or down an interviewee's hierarchies of ethical rules are called 'chains of reasons'. Langford and D'Cruz (in press) point out that while utilitarianism assumes a fairly pure form in some interviewees in the 19-21 year age range, religious ethics is often allied to rather than strictly separated from utilitarian ethics in the contemporary Australian undergraduate.

In the third of Trainer's phases there is a process of metaethical reflection. By this he means reflection on the question whether ethical values are absolute and exist independently of human desires and decisions (the view of many Platonists as well as of Kant) or whether they stem from the preferences and decisions of human individuals or groups (Trainer mentions Nietzsche, Sartre, Stevenson and Ayer as examples here). Trainer also paints a picture of current intellectual and general culture as dominated by the former, objectivist, view of metaethics, with the latter group (subjectivists) reacting as a rebellious minority. It is also argued that objectivism is linked to adherence to conventionally accepted ethical values, while subjectivists are less conventional in the content of their beliefs. This was supported by the finding that high objectivism scores on a scale that directly assessed metaethical beliefs showed moderate but persistent positive correlations with conventionally accepted values and assent to more particular rules aligned with those values.

It is worth emphasising that the description of development being offered here is multidimensional, as it includes a dimension of increasing elaboration of thought (the three phases already described),

a dimension of ideological individuation (especially the separation of secular from religious ideology) and a dimension of metaethical focus (from subjectivist to objectivist). The present paper concentrates on these three dimensions, though others are discussed by Trainer (1982) and Langford and D'Cruz (in press). This style of model differs from those of Kohlberg and Piaget, not only in arguing that development is multidimensional rather than unidimensional, but also in postulating that although development along some dimensions (e.g. the phases dimension) is unidirectional (from less elaborated to more elaborated thinking), development along other dimensions may proceed in different directions at different periods of an individual's development (e.g. ideological differentiation and metaethical focus).

Colby and Kohlberg's (1987) Stage 6 moral reasoning, like Trainer's third phase, also involves methodological reflection on ethical values. The paradigm case of such reasoning for them is Rawls's (1971) 'veil of ignorance' theory. This states that in considering moral rules or decisions we should adopt a viewpoint that assumes a veil of ignorance as to which role in the situation we are to occupy. This is an example of those general strategies that have been developed by Kantian philosophers since (and including) Kant to bridge the gap between ethical subjectivism and ethical objectivism. This was certainly Kant's own motive in adopting his methodological stance in ethics (Beck, 1965, pp. 5-7) and also seems to describe the tactics of Rawls (1971), Kohlberg (1981) and Habermas (1984), the last three being listed as typical cases of Stage 6 reasoning by Colby and Kohlberg. It has often been objected that Kohlberg's definition of his Stage 6 form of reasoning, as indeed his whole theory of the development of moral

reasoning, is biased in favour of limiting the highest type of moral thinking to specifically Kantian forms of metaethical reflection (Simpson, 1974; Hill, 1974; Peters, 1975, 1978; Fraenkel, 1976, 1978; Trainer, 1977, 1982; Bloom, 1977, 1986; Crittenden, 1978; Scharf, 1978). This objection has never received an adequate reply and provides an insuperable obstacle to the acceptance of Kohlberg's view of high-level moral reasoning. It is also highly probable that the extreme rarity of Stage 6 reasoning is linked to the restrictive definition of methodological or metaethical reflection offered. The widespread criticisms of Kohlberg's account of the earlier development of moral reasoning have also not received satisfactory replies, providing a further reason for not adopting a Kohlbergian framework (Simpson, 1974; Kuhn, 1976; Trainer, 1977, 1982; Nicolayev and Phillips, 1978; Blasi, 1980; Siegal, 1980; Cortese, 1984).

Gibbs (1979) has attempted to extend the Piagetian view of moral development to high-level moral reasoning through the idea that 'a cross-culturally uniform or standard phase of growth eventually enables members of the human species to become existentially self-aware in such a profound sense that a uniquely human phase of consciousness and development comes to be initiated.' (p. 98) This key passage, the repeated use of the term 'existential development' to describe the highest levels of moral reasoning, as well as the key example of Fromm's writings on the modern existential situation of 'homelessness', lead to the conclusion that Gibbs has replaced Kohlberg's claim that Kantian philosophy represents the summit of ethical development with the idea that existentialist philosophy plays this role. Thus he too unnecessarily restricts the definition of metaethical reasoning. Gibbs's account is

also weakened by the general weakness of Piaget's account of standard phase moral development. There are two main grounds for doubting Piaget's analysis here, the first being that many of his particular questions and techniques have been found to give misleading results (Johnson, 1962; Boehm and Nass, 1964; Breznitz and Kugelmass, 1967; Kugelmass and Breznitz, 1968; Armsby, 1971; McKechnie, 1971; Lickona, 1976; Modgil and Modgil, 1976; Karniol, 1978; Keasey, 1978; Tomlinson, 1980; Ferguson and Rule, 1982; Shultz et al., 1986). It is also the case that Piaget's main thesis that stage-like developmental changes in attitudes to and beliefs about rules are closely paralleled by such changes in the rules themselves is neither supported by his own results, nor by those of subsequent investigators (MacRae, 1954; Pittel and Mendelsohn, 1966; Lickona, 1976; Tomlinson, 1980; Langford and D'Cruz, in press). Notwithstanding these difficulties, some of Piaget's contentions are incorporated within the multidimensional model advocated here in a revised form. In particular, his claim that children move from heteronomy (reliance on adult views and decision-making) to autonomy (reliance on their own views and decision-making) is modified by Langford and D'Cruz (in press) as follows. One of the dimensions along which unidirectional developmental change occurs in the content of judgements and rules applying to some situations is along a heteronomy-autonomy dimension. There is a separate more general unidirectional shift in justifications for rules and judgements applying to most situations away from those that rely on authority to those that rely on self or equals, though justifications based on authority never comprise an actual majority of such justifications, even among quite young children.

Investigation of Trainer's three phases in the development of metaethical reasoning is particularly called for as Trainer (1982) presents his phases as a plausible intuitive summary of his experience of administering a wide variety of interview formats. No formal study of the phases has yet been reported. The aim of the present study was to undertake such a study using formal criteria for the identification of various types of ethical reasoning. The chief manifestation of developed 'articulation and clarification of ethical values' is the emergence of fluent chains of reasons connecting more particular judgements and rules to high level rules. Pilot studies had suggested that not only might the emergence of elementary chains of reasons be a precondition for metaethical reasoning, but that the emergence of the ability to extend such chains as far as ultimate values was also needed. Ultimate values are defined in this context as some version of the following three rules: act to produce the greatest happiness of or benefit for the greatest number of people; act to produce the greatest happiness of or benefit for an individual (usually the interviewee); act in accordance with the will of God or of divine beings. The present study aimed to test this conjecture through a cross-sectional study of undergraduate students.

A second conjecture derived from the study of Langford and D'Cruz (in press) was that 'reflective' ethical reasoning might also be a precondition for metaethical reasoning. Such reflective reasoning is based on the recognition of the following complications that arise in moving from ultimate values to specific rules and judgements: that individuals or groups may not know where their interests or happiness lie (termed ideological responses); that mortals may be unaware of or

misunderstand divine intentions (theological replies). It is plausible to think that these kinds of difficulty might act as a spur to metaethical reasoning. A second hypothesis to be tested, therefore, was that reflective reasoning is a precondition for the emergence of metaethical reasoning. The study also examined the phenomena of metaethical reasoning by the use of case studies.

THE SEQUENCE OF PHASES

Interviews were conducted on a sample of 60 university undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 24 years at an Australian university. Interviewees were selected as being willing to undertake the interviews for a small payment. 30 were male and 30 female. Each interviewee received an interview on the value of life (L), and an interview on the distribution of earnings (E), half receiving L first, half receiving E first. The interviews were similar to those used by Langford and D'Cruz (in press), except that interviewees were asked to project themselves into the situations involved in the interview rather than viewing them from outside. The style of interview was Kohlbergian, with interviewees being repeatedly pressed for their reasons for their judgements. Each interview concluded with three standard questions: 'a) Provide a summary of the various justifications they have given, ask if this is correct and whether the justifications can be taken any further; b) Is there any religious justification for your thinking on this?; c) In societies other than our own people have had different beliefs from your own. (Give an example.) How do you react to this?' These questions invite those interviewees who are able to do so to draw out and integrate chains of reasons and to reflect on the problem of ethical variability. Question b) prompts religious justification even though other justification types are not so prompted because it was felt that in a largely secularised society interviewees who hold religious views on ethical questions are often unwilling to air them without an explicit invitation.

One key methodological issue in determining whether a developmental sequence exists relates to the strength of the criteria used to assess

interviewees' possession of the relevant abilities. A weak criterion is one that accepts minimal evidence, such as recognition or comprehension, for possession of an ability. A strong criterion demands evidence of in-depth understanding, particularly an ability to produce an explanation for a judgement or opinion. According to Brainerd (1974) and Larsen (1977), the detection of sequences is hindered by the use of strong criteria. In the present study strong criteria based on production were chosen for the possession of 'developed chains of reasons', 'reflective ethical reasoning' and 'metaethical reasoning'. The main reason for choosing production criteria was that in the present exploratory phase of investigation in this area it would be premature to move to use of recognition, comprehension or choice measures before basic production phenomena have been clarified. The chains of reasons scored were of two types: those in which the interviewee moved from a less general rule to an ultimate rule or from an ultimate rule to a less general rule. Ultimate rules and the two kinds of reflective ethical reasoning (ideological and theological) were defined in the introduction. The production of one example was the criterion for possession of 'developed chains of reasons' and 'reflective ethical reasoning'. The criterion for the presence of metaethical reasoning was that the interviewee indicate on at least one occasion that one particular metaethical criterion was their preferred criterion and could be used to assess all moral claims.

Among the sixty interviewees all manifested reasoning at least at the level of 'isolated intuitive certainties'. Twelve showed at least one ideological response, four showed at least one theological response, sixteen showed at least one ultimate chaining response (up or down). No interviewee showed both ideological and theological responses, while

thirteen gave both a reflective and a chaining response. Four of the interviewees showed metaethical reasoning as defined by the criteria already described, all of whom showed at least one chaining response, though two showed no reflective response. Thus the suggestion that the emergence of high level chaining is a prerequisite for that of metaethical reasoning was supported. Using the null hypothesis that interviewees who showed chaining were as likely to exhibit metaethical reasoning as those who did not, this finding is significant, $p = .01$.

The suggestion that reflective reasoning is a prerequisite for metaethical reasoning was not supported using the measure of reflective reasoning adopted. The interview style, particularly the repeated requests for justification and item a), was well-adapted to elicit ultimate chaining responses, whereas individuals who could think at a reflective level may not always have given evidence of this. Reinvestigation of the second hypothesis using a different elicitation technique would therefore be of interest.

THE CASE STUDIES

The cases selected using the criteria for metaethical reasoning included one case of a Christian fundamentalist, two cases of individualistic subjectivism and one Marxist. Individualistic subjectivism is the doctrine that all moral values originate from the individual. The fundamentalist and Marxist were female, the two subjectivists male. The Christian fundamentalist and one of the subjectivists answered interview L first, while one subjectivist and the Marxist answered interview E first. For brevity, only the first

interview is reported for each case. This was always the interview that yielded the most revealing methodological discussion.

The Fundamentalist

The first question in the L interview asks the interviewee to imagine they are among a group of teenagers who kill someone while robbing a service station. They are then asked if this is right and whether they can justify their reply. The interviewee's first reply was 'Look I don't know if I'm going to be much use to you for this.' 'Why not?' 'Well I'm afraid I can't even start what you've asked me to do because I ... I live with Jesus you see, it's the most real thing in my life, and I couldn't, well imagine myself killing another human being.' 'No, that's fine. We just do that for the interview. Suppose I just asked you if these teenagers did this and they killed someone, would that be right?' 'No, of course not.' 'And can you tell me why not?' 'Well I just did. It's to do with my relationship with Jesus.' 'Can you tell me anything more about that?' 'Well it changes everything you know. You should try it. How can I explain it to you? He is here, all the time, with us. It's the most important thing we can know.' 'And how do you know that Jesus doesn't want us to kill?' 'It says so in the Bible. But it's more than that. It's like direct knowledge. It's like being in love and then thinking about hurting the other person. God is love. It says that in the Bible too. Does it make sense at all?' Throughout the rest of the interview nearly all justifications are referred to direct experience of Jesus or of God, with occasional references to the Bible and 'what makes sense'. The idea that God wants human beings to be happy is mentioned once, but the main emphasis is on

direct experience that makes moral values obvious, backed up by the Bible.

While the established Christian churches are sometimes thought to encourage an objectivist view of ethics, the view expressed here is actually closer to Christian mysticism. God is conceived as a personality, a spirit, with which we come into direct contact through religious experience. Thus ethical truths are not so much objective as based on contact with a higher subjectivity. During such experiences ultimate ethical truths become obvious to us by a kind of participation in the divine 'experience'. This involves metaethical reflection for two reasons. The first is that in place of the standard kit of justifications we have just one overwhelming justification, namely direct experience of God, which is linked in a quite systematic way to subordinate justifications, like the truth of the Bible and God's desire for human beings to be happy. The second is that this is not just a rather fluent chain of reasons, but involves a clear conception of where the over-riding principles of the system come from.

First Subjectivist

This interviewee answered the first question in the E interview in a conventional manner. The second question asked if it was right for two members of a group of six teenagers to bully the other four out of money they had worked for. The interviewee initially replied 'No', but when asked to say why this wasn't right replied 'If two of your friends bully you that's a fact of life, I can't say whether it's right or wrong. It's wrong for me, but whether it's right for them is another thing. It's a contingency, it's not a thing you can apply.' 'So it's not a proper subject for moral judgement?' 'Whether their actions are right or wrong? No.' 'What is a proper subject for moral judgement?' 'Whether your own actions are right or wrong.' The interviewee then went on to explain that he would use moral terminology in a dispute such as might arise over the distribution of the money in the question, but this was just to settle disputes and was a 'practical' use of moral language, rather than representing a case where morality was involved 'in principle'. The interviewee also explained that the 'source' of all moral judgements was in himself - 'In the end you must be answerable for them.' Later on he sums up his position as follows: 'You start with the foundation that your parents put in place in your upbringing, that's often difficult to rationalise, even though you may wish to later on. Then on top of that a rational judgement is formed from the experience of an adult and then the highest priority in determining the way I act in any circumstance, is when I get up in the morning can I live with it? That may be some strange mix of unaccountable background and the more accountable rational overlay.' This interviewee's system of belief differed from what we can call standard individualistic subjectivism because he was

quite clear, and stated several times, that even when other people's actions affected him, they were not to be considered as moral or immoral, but only from a 'practical' point of view. Only his own actions were to be considered as moral and immoral and we could know which they were from the test: 'Can I live with myself knowing I did this?'

This interviewee showed very fluent chains of reasons and clearly understood that the two tests 'Was this my action?' and 'Can I live with my action?' could be systematically applied to all kinds of moral judgements and rules to determine their moral value.

Second Subjectivist

This interviewee showed the most dramatic defiance of conventional values. When asked in the first question of interview L if it was right for a group of teenagers of which he was a member to shoot someone during a service station robbery, he replied 'To me sounds fine, the plan, there's some reason behind the plan, and if they get away with it successful.' 'Why does the plan justify this?' 'I am not fully sure why we decided that we shoot whoever, but if someone did try to stop us and held somebody back or found out information, so that we might get caught and put in jail, pretty horrid time in there.' During the second question, about a girl who kills her boyfriend out of jealousy, he explains that although he has given answers (if unconventional ones) to earlier questions, there is really no such thing as morality. Asked if people should do what they need to do in order to satisfy themselves (an idea he had appeared to endorse), he says 'People do do, and also they don't have a great deal of control over their actions. I don't see any

morals being an entity at all.' 'So strictly speaking these questions are all meaningless.' 'Yes. Totally meaningless.'

The rest of the interview revealed that he had been sitting on a bus the previous week and it had suddenly come to him that there is no such thing as morality and that in the future he would do what pleased him rather than what pleased others. He had spent some time since this realisation attempting to reorganise his beliefs and behaviour to fit in with these principles. One could argue that this position is not so much metaethical as antiethical, as he denies that the term morality has any meaning at all. However, it seems that this is largely a terminological difference as he has not given up making those kinds of decisions about action that we normally call moral decisions.

The Marxist

This interviewee began by answering the first question in interview E, about the division of money earned by a group, by saying that equal pay for equal work was justified by the labour theory of value, which would probably not have pleased Marx himself, but was mentioned by a number of the other Marxist-influenced students interviewed. She then went on to expand this into a defiance of conventional opinion by saying that a brain surgeon should get the same as an unskilled labourer, but older people should be paid somewhat more than younger people. An important concept in her moral belief system emerged in the third question, which asked if people should be restrained from spending their money to achieve (conventionally) immoral ends. Here she says 'It doesn't matter what sort of organisation of society you are living, you can't get away from social control. That point has become the arbitrator

of how you run society and how you should function otherwise.' After several references to the importance of having benign rather than the current malignant forms of social control, she comes to the core of her metaethical beliefs. In reply to a question about where basic rights come from, she says: 'From our own humanity. Once we started whatever state we were, some sort of animal. Communication power and the ability to organise and create better conditions for ourselves, inherit the ethical ideas and concepts, which have been thought through by more intelligent people.'

This interviewee showed less inclination to dwell on the metaethical foundations of her beliefs than the other three or to continually relate them to particular aspects of belief. However, she rapidly ascended up her chain of reasons from the evils of social control, through to basic rights and then to the metaethical foundations of basic rights in 'our own humanity' and human social evolution, showing that she had a thought-out view on metaethical issues. This was related to her opposition to religion, as an ethical system that claims to be supported by divine sanction, but is in fact an instrument of malignant social control, a view she expanded at some length.

Conclusions From the Case Studies

The case studies illustrate the extent to which metaethical thinking is bound up with the ethical world views of the interviewees and with motivational factors. They also throw light on the extent to which reflection on metaethical criteria is associated with changes in the content of moral rules and values. According to Trainer (1982) there are two main kinds of metaethical reasoning among Australian university

students. In the first, objectivist metaethical criteria are integrated with the Christian world view to form a value system that is largely a refinement of conventional morality. In the second, objectivist or subjectivist metaethical criteria are integrated with varieties of humanism to form a value system whose content is more at variance with conventional morality (p. 206). (It appears, though it is not made fully explicit, that, pace Althusser, Marxism is here to be considered a variety of humanism!) The process of humanistic reorganisation of values goes further and results in more unconventional values when subjectivist metaethical criteria are adopted.

Trainer's position creates a difficulty here, as while he distinguishes between emotivism and scepticism as subvarieties of metaethical subjectivism, he does not distinguish, as least for the purpose of his empirical studies, between individualistic subjectivism and social subjectivism as metaethical positions (emotivism and scepticism are both examples of individualistic subjectivism). The most common example of social subjectivism is the view that all ethical principles derive from 'humanity' rather than the individual. It is plausible to think that it is individualistic subjectivism that will produce the most dramatic reorganisation in the content of an individual's ethical beliefs, while social subjectivism is likely to have a less dramatic impact. This speculation receives support from the case studies as it was the two individualistic subjectivists who showed the greatest defiance of conventional values, while the Marxist, who gave a social subjectivist criterion, was less unconventional.

The case study of the fundamentalist suggests that religious metaethical thinking should be subdivided into objectivist and higher

subjectivity varieties. The latter has probably become more important among Australian undergraduates, in the form of Christian revivalism, since the interviews reported in Trainer (1982). It is likely that adoption of the higher subjectivity criterion results in greater reorganisation of values than religious objectivism, as suggested by the phrase 'born again'.

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS

Three aspects of the results are particularly relevant to educational considerations. Firstly, they disturb the rather comforting supposition, deriving from the work of Kohlberg, that a high level of moral reasoning is necessarily allied to a highly 'ethical' content in values, in the sense of adherence to a refined version of conventional values. Secondly, they re-emphasise the already prevailing conception that metaethical reasoning, even when liberally defined, is unusual among the undergraduate population and probably among adults at large. Thirdly, the case studies suggest that metaethical reasoning is closely allied to motivational and ideological impulses, whether these be those towards the belongingness and fellowship of Christianity and Marxism or towards the freedom from conventional constraint characteristic of individualistic subjectivism.

The particular definition of metaethical reasoning adopted here is likely to include cases that are less socially acceptable than those that would be acceptable under Kohlberg's definition, as it allows for the inclusion of that most socially unacceptable group, the individualistic subjectivists. At the same time, the inclusion of Christianity, Marxism and radical humanism (the last not represented in the case studies) is likely to make it more socially acceptable than would be the case if we adopted Gibbs's (1979) approach. But as the definition adopted here seems the most defensible one, and even though individualistic subjectivists may have been somewhat over-represented in the present sample, we are likely to find that metaethical reasoning runs counter both to conventional thinking and to the sensitivities of politicians and the public. It could even be argued that it is so

antisocial we should abandon any instruction in it. This raises very wide-ranging issues, but two points can be mentioned. First, this would mark a clear, though not unusual, commitment to irrationalism. Secondly, it is likely that the forms of metaethical thinking discussed in the case studies are less 'socially dangerous' than might appear on the surface. Their proponents tend ultimately to work them into something less unconventional. Some of these are those who Kohlberg tried to fit into the Procrustean bed of his stages by calling them Stage 4½. His longitudinal studies showed, as we might expect, that such individuals tend to become more conventional after they leave university or college (Kohlberg and Kramer, 1969; Kohlberg, 1973; Kohlberg and Armon, 1983; Colby and Kohlberg, 1987).

Although only about seven percent of the sample showed well-established metaethical reasoning, nearly twenty seven percent showed the immediate prerequisite for this by demonstrating high level chains of reasons. It would be interesting to find out what percentage of the undergraduate population could engage in metaethical reasoning under the influence of teaching. Such teaching should probably take the form of instruction in the place of metaethical considerations within the major ethical belief systems, with attention to the motivational aspects of such systems, rather than of purely methodological instruction. The implications of the findings on sequencing for moral education in schools are that instruction should concentrate on helping students link low-level rules with ultimate values.

A more general implication of the approach to moral reasoning adopted here is that it shows that Kohlberg's attempt to make moral education, especially that conducted in schools, appear to be a value-

free and therefore relatively uncontroversial enterprise was mistaken. His theory of moral education effectively short-circuits the problem of the incompatibility of, for instance, religious and non-religious views of ethics by supposing that there is a value-free sequence of justifications for ethical principles and that moral education can concentrate on moving students through this sequence. The approach advocated here is less comfortable in this respect as it supposes that secular and religious approaches to ethics (as well as particular styles of ethics within these broad categories) will differ in both the content of ethical rules and their justification. Presentation of 'comparative value systems' is one solution to the problems raised here that will probably be effective at tertiary level. At junior secondary and primary levels such an approach would probably be difficult for students to grasp, as well as leading to confusion about particular issues of practical conduct and some disapproval from parents. In practice most Western countries have already adopted a partial solution to this difficulty by allowing schools to advertise that they teach either secular or certain varieties of religious ethics. Parents then select the moral values they want their children to learn. Some theories of education in a pluralist democracy, such as that of Crittenden (1982), would want to place some limits on the kinds of values that can be taught in schools within such a system of choice, so that children will grow up with the essential tolerance of other viewpoints needed to prevent, if nothing else, civil war. Within such limits we may need to make a definite choice about the values young children are to imbibe, particularly when we reflect that Trainer's 'isolated intuitive certainties' are claimed to be largely derived from socialisation. This

contrasts with Kohlberg's notion that children develop ethics for themselves from their experiences of role-taking, an approach that implicitly absolves adults of responsibility for the moral outlook of children.

CONCLUSIONS

The study reported supports Trainer's (1982) view that there are three distinct and sequential phases in the achievement of metaethical reasoning: isolated intuitive certainties; chains of reasons; metaethical reasoning. A study using strong criteria showed that the attainment of advanced chains of reasons is a prerequisite for the emergence of metaethical reasoning. That such clear-cut findings could be achieved using strong criteria suggests that the developmental sequence concerned is well-defined. Studies using weak criteria would provide a fuller picture here.

Four case studies of metaethical reasoning were reported, illustrating some of the features of this as found within particular ethical belief systems. It was concluded that metaethical reasoning is probably less socially disruptive than a superficial view of the case studies would suggest, although its promotion does raise questions about the role of education in making society more difficult rather than easier to govern.

It was also suggested that instruction in metaethical reasoning as found within elaborated belief systems that emphasises the motivational components of such systems is likely to be more effective than purely methodological consideration for tertiary students. The approach to moral reasoning adopted suggests that adults need to accept greater

responsibility for the induction of younger students into particular ethical outlooks and systems of conduct than implied by Kohlberg's approach to moral education.

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